

ALONG CAME BILLY

by Brooks Kohler

Through the screen door I could see him approaching, wearing dusty pants and a rust-colored shirt, carrying a newspaper in one hand, and dangling a green gunny sack from his shoulder. Each step tugged a limp out of a worn, grey boot. His hair was dark with traces of white, unkempt and dirty, and his eyes were yellow, beaming out of sun-dried skin.

“Mom!” I shouted. “There’s a man comin’ up the road!”

My mother rushed in from the kitchen, rubbing her hands against her apron. She looked out and saw the figure.

“Go get your pa. Quick!”

In a stop, start, sprint, I hit the screen door, angled past him with my feet sliding, catching only a glimpse of him. The man tried to speak, but I kept running -- around the house and down the path -- until I came to the barn. When I arrived out of breath and shaken, Dad was hammering out a bent tie-rod on the Farmhall. His body was glistening with sweat. He was wearing no shirt, and

every vein and earned muscle were exposed. A single Pall Mall was harbored between his lips, mangled with whiskers and nicotine tinge.

“Pa, come quick. There’s a man at the house.”

My father looked up and out. Seldom was he phased. He was silent. He just stared, and then started to pound, and asked, “What’s he want?”

“Don’t know. Ma called for ya.”

He stopped and was silent again, so silent I could hear the last of the tobacco crisp in the cherry as he placed his fingers to his mouth and vacuumed the draw. White smoke seeped out. “Best see what he wants,” he said. Placing the hammer down, he walked past me and gave me a playful hand slap to the head. I smiled. My father didn’t show much affection, and any I could get was worth it all.

When it came to men, he was my hero, tall and broad, like Superman, and as mysterious as the Lone Ranger. I was only ten, but even then he amazed me. All of my friends’ fathers were braggers, but not mine. He seldom talked, and my

mother often joked that my father would be the only man at the rapture with nothing to say.

He sneaked up to the backdoor and gently opened the screen. It was summer, so every door was open, each one protected by a cheap tin mesh bought at Shaker's Rag Store. Upon entering the house, we heard mumbling. Whoever it was had my mother's attention. So, together my father and I eased our way from room to room until he stopped at the closet. I watched as he pulled out a single gauge, breaking the barrel, checking to make sure it was loaded with 12-shot buck. Then, without asking me to run or hide, I followed, as if I was going to be taught another lesson in manhood.

My mother was on the porch, talking, when from behind my father pushed opened the screen door. She flinched and turned around. The man saw the gun, but he didn't flinch. He didn't do anything but stare at my father's weathered face and piercing eyes.

"It's the Kellerman boy. He's come back home!" exclaimed my mother. "Can you believe

it?”

Billy Kellerman. Just two years prior, in 1943, he had left, excited to go off and fight. The entire town turned out for his leaving ceremony. I even got out of school. Now he was back. Left young and came home old...tired...brittle.

“You Rosco’s boy, Billy?”

“Yes, sir, sure am.” He paused and swallowed, as if he had waited the entire trip to say what came next. “It’s hell on the red over there.”

My father looked at my mother. He gave her that glare that meant something’s not right. “Look likes somethin’ got ya, boy.”

“It made me sick.”

My father was silent, nothing usual, but he was stewing.

“Well, wash your hands. Don’t be gettin’ the rest of us sick.”

Pa turned to go back inside.

My mother continued, “I’ll get you some food.”

As quick as that, my father snapped, “You eat

on the porch.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Billy.

“Jim.”

“That boy’s sick, Ivy,” I heard Pa say low and soft. “I don’t want him makin’ the rest of us sick. You hear that, boy?”

Billy raised his head to my father.

“You gonna eat, you do it out here, and you wanna relieve yourself; you do it out there behind that elm,” Pa told him.

Billy looked toward the yard.

“Yes, sir.”

Pa’s words were cold, and I could tell they hurt my mother in a place only the devil walked. When she was just a girl, less than five, she had watched her own grandfather die of consumption. Everyone, including the preacher - who affirmed that God’s love could conquer all - was afraid to visit. In the stores, in their presence, women covered their faces with handkerchiefs. Children called my mother names. Flowers mysteriously showed up at her parents’ doorsteps. It hurt my

mother that my father had said that; it hurt her even more because he reminded her of a time when nobody wanted her, not even the preacher, not even Jesus.

Yet, before all hope was lost, my father paused and turned.

“I’m real sorry to hear about your daddy. He was good. He was honest. He helped me here, from time to time.”

My mother didn’t say a word. The expression on her face said it all. Kindness and evil -- they made an odd pair.

Then Pa opened the screen door and said, “I’ll call your momma and tell her the train dropped you off.”

The screen door slammed, and Billy just stared. No tears. No anger. No bother.

That evening the house was silent. I wanted to listen to the Lone Ranger, but my father had told me to stay off the radio. “If I can’t hear the Opry,” he said in a disgusted tone, “you can’t hear that show.” The newspaper crackled in his hands. The

house was quiet for a reason. We all wanted to know when Billy left. My father had placed us on quarantine until he had, not even allowing my mother to offer him another plate. All the young man could do was sit on the porch and listen to the crickets, but for some odd reason, there weren't any -- not even a chirp.

Suddenly, the sound of an engine rumbled and brakes squeaked. We waited. From outside we could hear someone say, "Well, ain't you gonna say bye?" But as we listened, no response came, and then, like that, a door slammed shut, and the truck was thrown into gear, sputtering away, metal clanking against metal. The sound was normal on our farm, but odd for the first time – odd.

My mother stood and walked to the screen door. She looked out and saw the empty plate and the dry glass of water. She turned back to my father. He had been reading the newspaper, but he stood up, folded the paper, and exited the room. His boots beat against the floor boards...THUD...THUD...THUD... Moments later he

returned, wearing gloves and carrying a sack. It was a hollow feeling as he walked to the door, my mother gazing at him like a cat waiting to pounce. Then...

“You treated him awful!”

The sudden breaking of silence and crescendo that followed made the mood even more tense. I wished the radio had been on. Some men, forced upon in this way, forced into loudness then silence, would have hit her and knocked her to the ground! Not my father. He loved her, and he loved me, which made what he had done even more sickening. He did it because he wanted to protect us, not to hurt us.

That night I lay in bed thinking about Billy, thinking about what he had experienced. The house was hot and humid, which was nothing new. My body lay clammy on a thin sheet, and outside my window a big, fat, speckled spider tap danced on its web. Through the poorly insulated walls, I could hear them arguing, not loud -- just mumbles and the occasional word I can't mention. Bed

springs creaked as feet touched the floor, paced, and then climbed back into bed. It was a long night, hot, humid, and no sleep.

Next morning, a loud clap of thunder broke to the southwest. Shortly thereafter, rain began to fall, banging hard against the shingles. Outside it smacked against the dry ground, made grassless by our constant meanderings. The smell of mud clung in the air. I sat at the kitchen table munching toast, my father sipped coffee, my mother toiled over hot cast iron. She was silent, and had she not been humming a tune, the only other hint of her even being in the room would have been the occasional scrape or clank.

With my father, nothing had changed. Each sip and slurp were the same as the day before. His routine was to start with the weather and then work his way to the local. Next he would move onto the national and then set the paper down and briefly recap what he'd read. He'd say, "It's gonna rain till Tuesday. Tanners had their baby, a girl named Pageant. Washington, well..."

And Pa always ended the same, by mentioning Washington with a tone of disgust. The depression had hit our community hard. Folks who had trusted national banks lost money. My own father lost money, but not much. All they took was a combine - from others, they took their homes, their reason to live.

The man I called father rarely, if ever, talked bad about a person, but when it came to politics, he had no use for folks who smiled all the time. Preachers, politicians, lawyers, and bankers all smiled when the goin' got bad. If there was any lesson he taught me, any lesson I learned from being down right, country simple, it was to never trust anybody who smiles all of the time. "They want something," Pa would say, "and they ain't earned it."

When Sunday came, we all climbed into the only Hudson truck within a hundred miles. It was a '37 Terraplane, painted solid black, and was hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. The fender flares had to be removed because they

clogged with mud too easily in the pasture, and when it came to parts, my father had to order them. He had been loaned the truck by his brother who had bought it, left for Canada to prospect gold, and had never returned. So, in essence, it was a bargain, and it ran pretty well, better than the standards. Next to the fender flares, the only other physical drawback was the grill, which reminded me of buzzard's beak.

Now for the life of me, I never learned why the church building was called what it was, but we attended The First Baptist Church of Squirrel Nut Ridge and Walnut Grove. It was a small church, a retired schoolhouse, and once inside, it smelled of honey and mildew. The benches were carved up with initials and names. During long sermons, I tried to carve my own name, but my mother always slapped my hand. On one occasion, the sound of flesh slapping flesh was so loud the preacher stopped, cleared his throat, and continued.

We sat in the third row, right side, close to the isle. The church had no electricity and no fans. A

constant swiping sound resonated through the air, as women fanned themselves. This caused my hair to flutter, breezes coming from here and there. Sweat dripped down your face and when you stood up to sing the closing hymn, which was the altar call, and your shirt would stick to the back of the bench. My father complained he had ruined more shirts in church than in the fields. My mother wouldn't listen, and she would continue on her Christian ways, tolerating his faults and sacrificing her wants.

It was during the final hymn, when everyone was fidgety and anxious for fried chicken, green beans, and biscuits, that a sickening, foul odor came upon me. Though I was singing, I wasn't really trying, and I turned. There he was, walking the aisle, slow and weak, the life drained from him. My father was closest to the aisle, assuming his manly role in the church as Master of the House, but when he saw Billy Kellerman being helped by his mother to the pulpit, my father moved close to my mother, invading her space and causing her to move

without exception.

She kept on singing. I kept on staring. My father looked at me and nodded to the hymn book I was holding. In my heart I knew he was as amazed as I was, probably wanting to bolt to the door, but he started to sing loud and strong. So, I did the same - loud and strong!

As we sang, Billy continued to the pulpit. The preacher smiled, joy in his heart. He stepped down from where he stood and placed his hands on Billy. I remember thinking: my father would never do that. Then, the preacher placed his hands on Billy's forehead and closed his eyes, raising the Bible high to the sky, mouthing words, talking personally to God Who was looking down.

I took this moment to glance at my father. He was still singing -- but not as loud. The preacher then reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny bottle.

"Oil," I heard my mother say softly, but loud enough to be heard. She reached over and grabbed my hand tight; she did the same to my father, and

he looked at her, gave an awkward smile, and continued to sing. My mother was stoned, high on it all, and I couldn't understand why. All it was, I thought, was oil, but as the preacher applied it to Billy's forehead, people started to clap. Billy's hands started to shake, and he wobbled a bit, acting like the men I'd seen outside the theater on Friday nights.

"Friends!" The preacher exclaimed. "We have seen the power of God at work! At work!" My mother tightened her grasp. It was almost painful. The music faded, and Billy stood staring at us: his friends, his neighbors, the closed doors in his face.

"I want to thank you all for prayin' for me," he said. "It's meant a lot to me."

Even then he didn't cry. He just turned to the preacher, said a few words, and started back down the aisle, but as he did, I witnessed something as close to a miracle as I have ever seen. As Billy passed by, my father, spurred on by something greater than you or me, reached out and took Billy's

hand.

“I’m proud of you, son,” Pa said, confident and sure.

Billy smiled, staring at him through those yellow eyes, and walked on. He lived another three years. Then, after a sleepless night in October of 1948, we laid him to rest atop Crabshaw Hill, overlooking his parents’ farm. Billy was twenty-seven when he passed away.

THE END

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